REPORT: CIVIL SOCIETY HAS DWINDLING FREEDOMS, FACES RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IN TURKEY

Civil society organizations have gradually had their freedoms narrowed down as they have been subjected to various restrictions in their activities, according to a recently released report by the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (OSBAS).

OSBAS, a foundation working toward a more powerful and effective civil society, recently issued the “Civil Society Watch Report 2013-2014.”

President Recep Enser, who spoke to Sunday’s Zamán about the details of the report, said Turkey tradition- ally views a negative approach to “getting organized” under the term “Civil Society Organization” and that this is based on the fact that it was generally the members of civil society organizations and the organizations themselves that were first sub- jected to legal action during the country’s military coups.

Enser said when people send their children to a university in another city, they still feel the need to remind them not to take part in any demonstrations and only concentrate on their studies.

Recalling the killing of dozens of peace activists in terror- ist attacks in Suruç, a town in Sanliurfa province, in July and in Ankara in October, Enser said: “We must not disregard these. These are examples of how civil freedoms are being narrowed down in Turkey and what can happen to people who seek peace. After these incidents, could parents now ask their children to do something for the country’s festival Southeast [where there are ongoing clashes between the terrorist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and security forces, which have led to the killings of civilians]?"

A suicide bombing organized by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants on July 20 outside a cultural center in Suruç, near the Turkey-Syria border, killed 32 people and wounded 104. The explosion occurred while a large number of Socialist Youth Association (SCDP) members, who had traveled from Ankara, Diyarbakır, Istanbul and İzmir, were making a press statement regarding the recon- struction of the Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobanî.

The twin suicide attack in Suruç on Oct. 10, also car- ried out by ISIL militants, was the deadliest terrorist attack in the history of Turkey, with 112 dead. It targeted a group of pro-Kurdish and leftist activists who were gathering near Ankara’s central train station ahead of a peace rally.

According to Enser, legal restrictions in Turkey have made it hard for people to become members of civil society organizations. Citing a survey conducted by the Konda polling company during the Gezi Park protests, which were sparked in Istanbul in the summer of 2013 against government plans to demolish Gezi Park and went nationwide, Enser said around 85 percent of the activists who took part in the protest were not affiliated with any civil society organization; they were members of either an association run by foundations.

“We certainly want civil society to develop, but we want it to develop on a larger scale, like federations or confederations, not just as foundations or associations. But there is a large group of people who do not want to be restricted to these models. People want to move more freely. They do not want to deal with paperwork and difficulties brought forward by regulations. So they find other ways to come together, like neighborhood initiatives and platforms,” Enser said.

Civil society organizations’ calls for financial sup- port from people most of the time fall on deaf ears because people make most of their donations to mosques in their neighborhood, Enser explained.

She noted even foundations such as the Compassion Association (Kafkat Der), which provides a home to dozens of homeless people and is transparent in all its dealings, cannot get sufficient support because people prefer to donate to people they know or to mosque foundations in their neighbor- hood, rather than a foundation they do not know closely.

Some organizations remarkably successful

Despite the obstacles and difficulties they face, some civil society organizations have made great achievements in their work and receive lots of praise from society.

Enser cites The Platform to Stop Domestic Violence, Oy ve Otels (Vote and Beyond), a civil society initia- tive that mobilized thousands of people to monitor the vote counting process in an effort to prevent fraud in the elections held last year, and Community Volunteers As- sociation (TOC) as examples of successful civil society organizations, noting that these organizations bring to-gether people from various views and beliefs together.

Talking about Turkey’s goal to expand the space of civil society, Enser said: “We are working to increase the effectiveness of civil society organizations and for the formation of an environment that is legally and fi- nancially more appropriate for them to work in.”

“Democracy does not serve the interests of the state. This is also valid for developed countries. The aim of establishing a state is to protect the status quo. It is civil society that will bend it,” she said.

According to the report, around 13 percent of Turkey’s population is involved in civil society organiza- tion and there is one civil society organization for every 747 people in the country.

In Turkey, 15 percent of the associations work in the field of the promotion of human rights and freedoms while only 4 percent for foundations.

The report also shows that there is not a single public institution in Turkey that is responsible for develop- ing relations between public agencies and civil society organizations.

Instead of encour- aging the transfer of local financial re- sources to civil society organizations through tax incentives, Turkey makes the financ- ing of civil society organizations more difficult through mostly dispropor- tionate accounting practices.